

CLAUDIA HILLEBRANDT

Emotional Functions of Unreliable Narratives An Outline for Future Research

This paper explores supposable emotional functions of unreliable narratives on a systematic level. It discusses (1) what kind of research in the field of narrative unreliability has already been done regarding emotional functions of unreliability, (2) which concepts derived from emotional psychology may be of help to shape a typology of emotional response to narratives for analytical purposes focusing on textual features, (3) what it means to linguistically refer to a ›function‹ of a literary text in general, (4) between which types of functions one may distinguish here, which kind of functions of literary texts are of central interest from the perspective of narratology and what it means to speak of ›supposable emotional functions‹ in particular. Finally (5) some proposals are made to provide an outline for future research concerned with supposable emotional functions of unreliable narratives.

- (1) Taking Bläß's narratological typology of functions of unreliable narratives as a starting point, it is shown that received narratology so far has not established convincing categories for the description of emotional functions of unreliability – at least not on a systematic level. This is somehow surprising as Booth's approach in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* seeks to combine analytical descriptions of textual features with their supposed effects. Consequently, it can be claimed that findings derived from the field of emotional and reader psychology should be combined with traditional narratological categories to further shape a typology of emotional functions of unreliable narratives. Diegetic emotions form the centre of interest here, namely those that can be ascribed to the characters and the narrator of the fictive world as well as emotions that are aroused or at least influenced by the way in which the diegetic world is presented.
- (2) Following Vogel, emotions are described as emergent properties of the physical system. Phenomena of empathic and other sorts of emotional interaction with the characters of a piece of literature are discussed in further detail as well as diegetic emotions that stem from the structure of the discourse, namely suspense, surprise and disorientation. Naturally, there is a huge variety of other emotional phenomena that prove to be crucial during the reception process, i. e. thematic as well as communication emotions, but these lie beyond the

viewpoint of narratology which focuses on textual features rather than on contextual factors.

- (3) Regarding the term ›function‹, I propose to employ Stecker's explication: A piece of art has a function F, if relative to a context, it has the present ability or capacity to fulfill a purpose, with which it is made or used, of F-ing or fulfills such a purpose.
- (4) This explication gives way to a wide range of actual as well as potential functions of an artwork. Following Eder's considerations regarding fictional as well as metafictional communication processes, one can distinguish between intentional, ideal, supposable, group-specific as well as individual empirical functions of literary artefacts.
- (5) Unreliable narratives function as appropriate instruments to engender emotions that mainly derive from the structure of the discourse, namely suspense, surprise and, to a certain extent, disorientation. Unreliability, in addition, can also be held responsible for influencing the emotional relationship of the reader with the characters and a potential figurative narrator.

More precisely, it can be presumed that axiologically unreliable narratives are more likely to engender morally coloured emotions whereas mimetically unreliable narratives without a narrator tend to disorient on a global level, while mimetically unreliable narratives with a narrator give way to specific effects of suspense and surprise.

As far as the emotional relationship to the characters of the fictional world is concerned, it is argued that processes of emotional attachment with fictional characters should be conceived as a complex set of interactions between both structural factors and a particular content. For analytical purposes, it is proposed to distinguish between momentary empathic mental processes and processes that derive from evaluations resulting in a stable emotional attachment to a character. While interpreting a text, literary critics can bring out different strategies of how appreciation and/or sympathy for a character or narrator is established or destroyed. In general, it is assumed that the emotional attachment with characters depends on the type of unreliability provided in the narrative.

Future studies concerned with supposable emotional functions of unreliability should (1) take into account a broad understanding of the term ›unreliability‹, and (2) refer to a distinguished typology of emotional reactions towards literary texts.

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